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AUTHOR Tarleau, Alison T.
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ABSTRACT

Although the range of characteristics that typify the best in rural child welfare are not discussed in the literature, there is discussion of the importance of rural social work. The unique characteristics of rural communities, the limited funding for social work programs, and the differences in child welfare problems make implementation of urban programs ineffective. Rural child welfare workers must be accepted by the rural citizens, be knowledgeable of rural customs, be able to work independently, and be capable of working with existing indigenous social programs. Rural social workers are generalists, and as such, are expected to deal with the child as part of a series of interlocking systems--family, school, and community. To develop the sophistication necessary to effectively implement rural social work programs, child welfare students should be afforded classes and field experiences which provide an awareness of the rural culture and community. (AH)

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RURAL CHILD WELFARE

Alison T. Tarleau, Ph.D.
Research Assistant
Region VII Child Welfare Training Center
St. Louis, Missouri

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Child welfare services seek to ensure the right of all children to experience love and permanence within their own families. While this objective is straightforward and easily stated, it is not easy to implement. This is particularly true for that segment of children who live in rural areas of the United States. The structure of rural communities create problems that are unique to families in this setting and call for solutions that are geared to these special needs. As the demands of the austere economy of the 1980's limit the monies and personnel that can be allocated to rural child welfare, it will become increasingly important that a carefully planned, efficient strategy be used to deliver rural child welfare services. This paper is an attempt by the Region VII Child Welfare Training Center to begin the development of such a cohesive plan by reviewing and assessing rural child welfare and rural child welfare services as they exist today.

Review of the Literature

Child Welfare:

There is some mixing of the terms, "child welfare" and "child welfare services" in the literature. We wish to explore a more limited definition of child welfare first. Turitz and Smith (1965) define child welfare as:

...designed to promote favorable conditions to protect them (children) from harm, to safeguard their rights and to help overcome obstacles to the fulfillment, use and enjoyment of their individual personalities.

(Turitz and Smith, 1965, 137).

In this context, child welfare is meant to apply to the needs of all children. Child welfare would not solely be the province of social workers but would be practiced by teachers, medical personnel and a whole range of people who work with children.

Another, less general definition of child welfare is one that Richman uses: "... field of practice concerned with children whose circumstances within themselves, their family or community may jeopardize their normal development" (Richman in Kadushin, 1974). It is at this point that child welfare and child welfare services begin to overlap. Richman's definition is basically limited to that which is done by social workers who deliver services to children with definite social problems. The Child Welfare League of America and the Council on Social Work Education both discuss child welfare as a field of practice delivering services to children whose families cannot or do not provide adequately for them. Child welfare services are, therefore, aimed at strengthening the parent-child relationship by reinforcing, supplementing or substituting for the functions that parents have difficulty in performing. Child welfare services may address whatever problem there is directly, or may work indirectly by modifying existing institutions or creating new ones that improve conditions for children and their parents (Kadushin, 1974; Child Welfare League, 1959). Put in other words, child welfare services may seek to prevent the occurrence of a problem by modifying the communal supports for a family and/or minimizing environmental stress. Child welfare services may also be geared at stopping a problem already existing by treating it specifically.

Another way of looking at child welfare is to consider which children are actually experiencing problems that would bring them into contact with the child welfare system.

Nearly one-third of the United States population, approximately 66 million, is under 18. Of these:

- * 17 1/2 million exist in severe poverty.
- * 20 million are not fully protected against prevalent childhood diseases.

- * 1 million are the victims of child abuse and neglect.
- * 1 million run away from home each year for reasons ranging from teenage rebellion to untenable living conditions from which they must escape.
- * Suicide is the third leading cause of death, surpassed only by accidents and homicide for children aged 10 - 19.
- * 77,000 children under 18 are in prisons, about 14,000 of them incarcerated with adults.
- * At least 5 million have no regular source of medical care.
- * 17 million have never seen a dentist.

Although these problems reflect some of the primary reasons that bring children into the child welfare system, the number of children who are reached by the system and the kind of services being offered to them, is less clear (Kadushin, 1976). Shyne and Schroeder (1978) provided some data that indicate that within the first quarter of 1977, 18 million children under the age of 18 were receiving services from agencies in the public sector. There is unfortunately little in the available data that details the type of services that actually are given to children with particular problems. It may well be that with child welfare being a field that has not developed a codified set of theories, practice of child welfare becomes especially fragmented. The experiences of workers are not seen as part of a cumulative system of interventions by the agency, so the individual must depend on idiosyncratic experiences (Kadushin, 1976). Kadushin (1978) concluded that child welfare services were often not appropriate for the situation or client; workers were coercive and authoritarian; and their decision-making process was often arbitrary and lacked a clear diagnostic focus. The child welfare system tends to

operate "against the achievement of permanency for many children - particularly the non-white and the poor" (Kadushin, 1967, p. 41).

To summarize, child welfare can be used in three different contexts. First, it can designate a social environment: that group of conditions that allow children to develop their full potentials. Second, child welfare is a field of practice in social work that is focused on the problems that may occur in parent/child relationships. Third, the services that actually are delivered to children who have come into the formal social service system.

Rurality

The initial concern in understanding rural child welfare is to understand the structure of the rural community. According to the 1970 census, roughly 27% of our population is rural, i.e. lives in areas of 2,500 or less (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1973). Others have tried to use social measures, like type of land use, ethnicity or industry to categorize rural communities. Rurality may be subdivided into areas of farms, of rural non-farms, of small cities and urban fringes (Miles, 1970). Alternatively, Copp (1976) focuses on the subpopulations that make up the rural community (e.g. migrant workers, tourists, southern rural Blacks, American Indians, etc.). Some authorities even have defined the rural community in terms of its consequences for the rural inhabitant: "...area which lags behind in population per square mile, in education, in variety of experience and finally in the power to control its destiny," (Buxton, 1973).

Without a universally accepted definition of rurality, many social scientists have fallen back on a comparative method of contrasting a community with some ideal type of rural or urban area. This literature typifies rural villages as a community characterized by close-knit groups in which most social relationships are intensive, cohesive, affective and multi-faceted. It is a community that stresses respect for tradition and strong family and religious relationships (Durkheim, 1964; Tonnies, 1967; Ginsberg, 1973).

To summarize, there are a variety of definitions of rurality that are in use today. The one that is probably used most frequently and is simplest is the Census definition. There are alternatives but they are not nearly as widely accepted.

Rural Child Welfare

The range of characteristics that typify the best in rural child welfare are not discussed to any great extent in the literature. There is, however, discussion about what is important in the practice of rural social work, and the general conclusions reached can be used to explain why there is little on the specifics of rural child welfare.

The rural social workers may have to practice alone or as part of a small group. He/she needs to be able to deliver a broad spectrum of assistance to the community. Child welfare is part of a general practice.

To put this in a slightly different context, Johnson (1977) suggests that highly specialized tertiary social services be confined to metropolitan areas, secondary social services which are broader in their scope should be available in the larger non-metropolitan areas; primary prevention would be the major focus in rural areas. The generalist is able to undertake those tasks for which he/she has been prepared while deciding on referral or consultation for matters outside of his/her area of expertise. Thus the rural, primary prevention oriented generalist can capitalize on the expertise in the surrounding and more urban communities. For example, Sefcik and Ormsby (1978) describe a child abuse and neglect center in rural Indiana. A central part of the project has been community education. Through outreach efforts, the community has been made more aware of this social problem. Presentations have been made at civic and community groups as well as in junior and senior high schools in the Indiana rural communities. Meanwhile the Center drew on a child care facility that could offer 24 hour crisis services in a nearby city for intensive medical aid to treat physical abuse.

The rural practitioner needs to have an appreciation for the formal and informal support systems and social institutions in the rural community so that programs can be adapted to these special demands. Polansky, et al. (1968) studied ten rural mothers whose child raising practices were considered inadequate. They found that though it is easy to legislate a solution to neglect, i.e. to remove the children from the neglectful home, it is an inappropriate answer. The problems that are unique to the rural subculture are not helped by urban policy.

A number of writers mentioned the coincidence of abuse with child neglect. It appears not to exist in the study sample... There was no evidence of the pervasive violence within the family that has often been cited in urban studies, either against children or between husband and wife. (Polansky, et al., 1968, 472).

Without these modifications, urban programs that may have useful points tend to bring little return on the investment of resources committed to them (Mermelstein and Sundet, 1977a). These traits demand not only a self-directed professional who can manage with a minimum of formal peer interaction, but also a person who can be open and flexible enough to accept the use of alternative short range plans without losing sight of long term goals, (e.g. Weisz, 1979). There are community demands for social workers to become members of the community rather than professionals dispensing advice. Effective work may be predicated on ones' ability to lead a much more public personal and professional life than one would in either a suburban or urban practice (Davies, 1977; Mermelstein and Sundet, 1977b). The rural practitioner must learn how to get along.

Minorities that are ethnically and culturally distinct suffer particularly from their lack of visibility and isolation from community help groups (Ginsberg, 1976). An empathy

for the distinctive qualities of the rural citizenry is especially important when dealing with child welfare problems. There are often difficulties in having rural communities recognize that child welfare issues are indeed problematic in the first place. Moreover, there are different culturally sanctioned methods for dealing with the minority child and his/her family that may not fit with the treatment methods developed in urban areas or may not even be typical of the rest of the rural community (Chestang, 1978). It is important, especially with the limited resources available to the rural workers that child welfare services implement the indigenous systems. It is the flexibility to use the local population that often helps to bridge the isolating gap between the community and social service agencies (e.g. Chappell, 1975). Sefcik and Ormsby (1978) point out that the need for "foreigners" to win acceptance in the small community is crucial to the task of organizing the community to deal with social problems including child welfare. It is all too easy to dismiss the issues and solutions by labeling them the product of "outlander" misconceptions.

Education Needs of Rural Child Welfare Worker

The skills that are needed for successful practice in rural child welfare require a particular form of education.

The education of child welfare workers needs to present students with the knowledge of rural demography, ecology, history and culture and the effect of these factors specifically on children and their families (Mermelstein and Sundet, 1978; Shepard, 1977). The rural child welfare worker must be prepared to contend with factors that are distinct from urban and suburban areas:

Social and Physical Environment

- Less dense population - poor transportation system
- Less social mobility - people physically separated
- Religion is primary shaping agent
- Monolithic economies - lack diversity of economic base
- Less disposable income
- Significant recent in-migration after years of out-migration
- Conservative political power structure
- Federal mandates frequently remove local control of program implementation
- Significant geographical barriers
- Local pride contributes provincialism
- Lower crime rates - fewer law enforcement personnel
- High unemployment and under-employment levels
- Greater problems - fewer resources
- Reliance upon informal systems
- Less formalized recreational and leisure-time activities
- Lack of understanding by urban based resource systems of rural problems
- Distance, geography and climate are factors
- Less industrialization
- Fewer competing power sources
- Overlapping roles of public officials
- Lack of formalized data base

(Webster & Campbell, 1977, pp. 7, 8).

The need to understand the rural family and the influences on it is central to analyzing the crises that are typical in rural communities. This means that the workers not only may encounter the stressful consequences of, for example, the isolation and poverty of a destitute rural economy or medical child neglect, but also the consequences of this isolation and poverty on finding and delivering services. The child is part of a whole community system and he/she can be helped the most if they are served through this open systems approach.

The generalist approach is one that constantly seeks to focus on the individual as part of the environment. Problems that arise can be conceptualized as a poor relationship between the individual child and his or her familial, academic or communal environments (Irey, 1978). This type of dual approach that looks at the individual and the community is particularly well suited for those working in rural child welfare since this approach takes cognizance of the environmental problems and also the environmental supports that can be marshalled to address a problem. This is of particular relevance in a rural setting where the practitioner may well have to depend on indigenous support systems as an integral part of the treatment plan (V.I.P., 1979). The generalist looks for solutions in the interaction of individual and community rather than outside the natural system. Therefore flexibility and resourcefulness are qualities that are constantly being emphasized in rural social work education as being of prime importance to the effective rural child welfare practitioner.

As with others who come into the rural setting from suburban and urban centers, the rural social worker must develop a sense of appreciation for the attitudes and lifestyle of the rural population. The entering worker is the outsider and must be able to overcome this distinct disadvantage. The worker needs to gain credibility in the eyes of the community.

I have pointed out that the social worker in a rural area may be set apart by age, dress, education and value system from the community in which he is working, and that because of the increased visibility, these factors are likely to seem more important in rural areas. To press for change in community structure may threaten local income, local mores, and the elaborate systems that all of us use to justify present and past behavior. We may challenge time-ingrained value systems and come to represent in local eyes the outside mass society that is trying to limit the freedom of local communities to control their destinies. (Buxton, 1976, 35).

Field placements can be constructed to be meaningful in developing the sophistication necessary to effectively carry out one's work in this unique setting, the rural community. Victor (1978) discusses three types of rural practice that are of particular worth. First there is the large social welfare agency delivering child welfare services. The student is the line worker reaching out to the understaffed rural client community. Ideally, the student can then bring information that he/she obtains by working in the rural setting back to include in the policy making of the agency, like a state public welfare agency. The second type of placement is one in which the student works to develop indigenous networks that operate to support children and families in crisis. These "horizontally linking" organizations are exemplified by groups like community parents/teachers, social action groups or a county minister association that may come together to focus on the needs of high risk families.

The third type of setting is that in which the student works as part of a locally governed, semi-autonomous agency like the rural school. This third type may be the ideal to use as a base of operations for extending services to those people not yet

reached because of ethnic or cultural barriers or the people who are simply beyond the usual forms of transportation.

Each of these three placements illustrates the importance of learning factors that effect child welfare in rural communities and how to mobilize local and other resources (state or federal or private monies, for example) to preserve the rural family. The strategies developed need to be rural in their very structure rather than revamped urban plans. This calls for social workers who have had experience in dealing with the organizations and people who are typically important to rural child welfare. Liberto (1977) in describing a successful rural model dealing with runaways highlights this point:

Although running away has been projected as an urban experience there is growing evidence that rural communities are also in need of services for these youth. There is concern however, that rural human service workers will simply replicate urban programs as federal support becomes available. Programs should reinforce the notion that workers must develop appropriate models relevant to the special conditions and needs of rural environments, (Liberto, 1977,46)

The practice can also help to develop the flexibility so necessary in rural social work. Out of the knowledge of what resources are available in the rural community, the workers can develop a plan and several alternatives that allow for the long range plans to still be met even if by secondary means. For example, the runaway project, Country Roads, drew on the strengths of family life to develop supplementary, indigenous support groups of community families.

Lastly, the successful rural child welfare worker needs the ability to work independently. This means that the professional isolation and lack of easy access to consultations and actual materials places a heavy burden on the rural professional. In rural child welfare education, it becomes important for the student to have a professional role model as well as role demonstrations of how the successful rural operation functions (Mermelstein and Sundet, 1978). This is particularly true since the traditional curriculum does not stress these skills.

Summary

The 1980s are projected to be a time of belt tightening in our country. In rural America, making do or doing without has been a way of life for a long time. As we move into this new decade, we need to try to recognize the all too often ignored rural family not only as a group needing social services but also as a model for coping in the austere economy. When social workers join with rural communities in delivering services to children in need, the outcomes may have much to offer populations in larger towns and cities. The stress in rural settings has been on the use of indigenous systems and natural helpers. This means that there does not have to be as large or complex a superstructure developed to deliver services. If funds are scarce, this simplified model has real assets for stable, relatively cohesive urban neighborhoods (like the Hill in St. Louis). The generalist who is expected to deal with the child as part of a series of interlocking systems, family, school, community, etc. has something special to offer not only to the rural population of children but also to children in cities. When there are frequent complaints about workers being overwhelmed by a social service bureaucracy, the perspective of seeing the child as part of a totality may allow a new and more efficient approach to be developed for urban children in urban communities. The demand of the rural community has been for the social worker, including those specializing in child welfare, to become a member of the community and to work within the framework of everyday life in that setting. It is the old fashion concept of "verstehen" (Gerth and

Mills, 1958). It is understanding from the perspective of the actor. This approach would bring an increased humanism to treatment across a country eager to find cost effective approaches to meet the needs of children in the 80s.

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